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Religion a Prominent Cloned-Food Issue

By Rick Weiss
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Thursday, October 19, 2006; A09

With federal officials close to approving the sale of meat and milk from cloned livestock and their offspring, experts for and against that policy said yesterday that such decisions should be based not only on the question of human safety -- the criterion used by the Food and Drug Administration -- but also on issues of ethics and animal welfare.

"These are animals. They're not just economic units. . . . They're not just machines," said Michael Appleby of the London-based World Society for the Protection of Animals.

Among the problems raised by the new technologies are how followers of some religions will manage their strict dietary rules if, say, meat in stores is made by a process deemed sinful or contains genes from an organism they are not supposed to eat.

At a Washington conference sponsored by Michigan State University and the nonpartisan Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, speakers with expertise in biology, philosophy, ethics and theology said that scientists must be part of an "implicit social compact" to use ethical means to solve societal problems.

"We need to continue to ask the 'Should we?' questions," said Nancy Jones, a public health scientist at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Many of yesterday's topics, such as "How well do farm animals deserve to be treated?" and "Do animals have species-specific natures that should not be altered?," have been simmering for years as farming practices have evolved to include artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization and embryo manipulation. But cloning and genetic engineering, Appleby said, "sharpen the question" about how much tampering is acceptable.

Some consumer groups and individuals, for example, oppose the marketing of meat from clones because many clones die in the first days of life, increasing the level of suffering in the world. Others argue more philosophically that every animal deserves a degree of individuality and integrity that would be violated by the production of cloned replicas.

Still others called for a slowing of animal biotechnology out of concern that the techniques will lead to unethical applications in humans.

"If people become comfortable with these technologies, then human cloning is inevitable," said E.J. Woodhouse, a political science professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Center for Ethics in Complex Systems in Troy, N.Y. "Proceeding very slowly is an important part of proceeding sensibly," he said.

Barbara Glenn, chief of animal biotechnology at the Washington-based Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), agreed on the importance of animal welfare.

"Does the animal matter? The answer is a resounding 'yes,' " said Glenn, who often makes the point that clones, because they are so valuable, are treated like royalty or rock stars. She said that the survival rate for clones "is approaching" that for animals produced by other assisted-reproduction technologies, and that clones that survive birth are healthy.

"They get up, nurse and run through the fields, just like conventional animals," Glenn said.

The world's religions are just now wrestling with how to respond to recent changes in animal agriculture, said Harold Coward, director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, B.C.

"New questions have required the development of new theologies," he said.

Hindus, he said, see animals as human souls in animal form and view eating meat as "quasi-cannibalism," so they need not ponder whether to eat clones. Nonetheless, he said, while Hindu leaders have said that genetically modified plants cannot be used in religious ceremonies, they have given their blessing to the consumption of those plants and to animal cloning generally.

Buddhists have addressed animal biotechnology mostly in terms of the motivation of the scientists doing the work, Coward said, and they accept the practice if the motivation is to reduce suffering.

Among Jewish scholars, "animal biotechnology is now a hot topic," Coward said, with cloning mostly deemed acceptable but the creation of gene-altered animals seen as a possible violation of Talmudic prohibitions against cross-species "grafting."

Muslim scholars were concerned at first that cloning was an usurpation of Allah's unique right to engage in creation. But discussions have since led to an acceptance of cloning and other animal alterations, on the rationale that the human talents undergirding the work are the gifts of Allah, Coward said.

Among Christian leaders, he said, cloning is largely seen "as an act of hubris, a great sin." But change is afoot, and even the Church of Scotland has approved small experiments for which economic gain was not the prime motivation.

The motivations of corporate cloners are mixed, panelists acknowledged, but there is at least some good there, several said.

"We think of this as advancing the healthiest animals," said Glenn of BIO. "And healthy animals make healthy food."

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